

Passions of the Soul*

A Review by Joanne C. Hillhouse

I have a confession to make. This has been a trying exercise. Trying because, I prefer to experience poetry the way I experience a song; viscerally. What is it about Diana Ross' *Mahogany* that stirs such melancholy in me? Why does Ella singing anything make me happy? Why is LL Cool J's *Mama Said Knock You Out* such effective battle armour? Why does Otis Redding's *Try a Little Tenderness* stir a deep yearning; Short Shirt's *Nobody go Run Me*, a fierce defiance; Obstinate's *Believe*, a hopeful patriotism? There is something in the matching of this word to this, the use of this image over that, the crying or leaping or leap-frogging of instruments – the choice of this instrument, this tool, over that – as much science as art. It's by accident – instinct - and yet not, for the artiste must understand the power of the words, symbols, notes, and instruments used, how to milk them and when to show restraint, where the magic lives. But I guess when it comes to poetry and music, a part of me prefers to embrace the magic of it rather than the methodology. If I find myself thinking more about the methodology than the power and effect of the work as a whole, then it becomes a distraction; like a hammy actor, upstaging the very work it's supposed to be serving. Bottom line, as much as I've engaged in literary analysis, I don't enjoy picking apart a poem, like it's a science project. Call me a sensualist, but with a poem, as with a song, I prefer to luxuriate in how it makes me feel.

But there *is* a 'science' to all this; especially so in the case of Dr. Elaine Olaoye's *Passions of the Soul* – an experiment that blurs the lines between the 'soft' science of psychology and the art of poetry.

Take the recipes at the back of the book, which suggest actual psychological applications for the poetry. I decided to try one of these recipes. In typical Caribbean style – we're known for cooking more by intuition than by strictly following recipes – I did my own take on it. Since my mind is never as restful these days as when I'm doing yoga – trying to breathe and not collapse into a rubbery heap – I decided to mix it in with my yoga routine. I did the 'Rosemaried Chicken and Tossed Time' since that's the one

that seemed most applicable given that my fridge is well-stocked with ‘overload and impatience’, ‘running (like a chicken without a head)’, and ‘punitive internalized deadlines’. As is often the case when you get creative with cooking, the combination - of the mental exercises with the mind-body yoga experience - proved a tasty surprise. It helped me experience the poems not just as beautifully evocative poetry but as useful therapy. It was interesting, and refreshing; though my arms – as I type this – still feel like rubber.

The three poems used in this exercise are *Thinking*, *Softly in the Twilight*, and *Colours of Joy*. In *Thinking*, I was challenged to peer into the confusion of my mind. Did my thoughts not, as the recommended section implied, have a frustrating power, did they not have the uncanny ability to have me futilely chasing my tale; were they not too often self-defeating, rooting me in past confusion, clouding future expectation? This wasn’t news to me, I suppose, but *Thinking* certainly got me thinking. Then after defrosting ‘patience’ and ‘grace’ – in my mind, green and leafy like spinach, for some reason – it was on to marinating – letting ‘patience’ and ‘commitment’ soak in as I read *Softly in the Twilight* somewhere between the Locust and Upward Facing Dog poses. As a result of reading this poem in this state, I saw it in a way I had not seen it before; or should I say, experienced it in a new way. I’d liked it before, the flow and rhythm of it, mostly; but what it also does, I discovered, is lead you – regresses you, if you will – beyond where your thoughts live to a harder to get to place.

“...Softly in the darkness
A poetess is reading to me,
Taking me back
Through mists and labyrinths of time
Unlocking and opening doors of perception wide,
Til I reach a space
Undetermined and unidentified
Where primordial joys and fears are amplified...”

Substitute psychologist for poetess, and “guiding” for “reading to” in line two, and you may see what I mean. Like yoga, like a psychologist, like poetry, the recipe’s digestive result is enlightenment, awakening. And so the poem continues, like a deep meditative exercise, which is essentially what this is – even I who’ve never successfully achieved true meditation can recognize that.

“...The bewitching mastery of words
Lures me back
To hiddenmost depths
...
Til
...
A welcome warmth re-emerges.
I move forward boldly,
Feeling awakening inside...”

It’s a bit like when the soothing voice of the yoga instructor on the TV prompts me to “awaken with breath” and re-settle into “the gesture of no fear” – my favourite way to end the session.

Essentially the poet-psychologist’s intent here is greater than art for art’s sake, a now-feeling to be experienced and discarded; there is a transformative intent; something that might be lost if the poems are simply read and the book closed and put aside without attempting the exercise – which, frankly, were it not for this assignment would have been the case with me. The ‘therapy’ leads to a happy place, to the *Colours of Joy*; where even more suggestion – to move beyond the weight of stressful thought towards feeling that engages all the senses purposefully – is planted. So that,

“...what first appears as illusions
Slowly turn into mind expanding illuminations...”

Ever the psychologist, Dr. Olaoye suggests this not as a quick fix but as a repeated exercise, the practice of which should make one more readily able to call feelings of relaxation and control to oneself.

It was a revealing process, one I *may* return to again.

It certainly makes the point of the book that poetry and psychology have more in common than may be discernable to the naked eye, or the closed mind.

In the book’s preface, Dr. Olaoye declares, “as a psychologist, I am fascinated by the broader role of poetry in human life.” She admitted in a late 2007 interview with me – conducted as she prepared to launch a scholarship at her alma mater, the Antigua Girls High School, which would benefit a student who placed equal value on science and the humanities – “in some circles, some people (don’t) know I’m a poet because they wouldn’t take my work seriously.” This was many years after the book had been

published and the camps, to infer from that quote, were still firmly aligned. In a way, this suggests a bit of daring on the part of Dr. Olaoye - who has taught psychology in the U.S. for more than 20 years, and continues, at this writing, to do so. She acknowledges the split between one thing – perceived as being largely subjective, and the other - part of a field that demands objectivity. But, those differences notwithstanding, she indicated in her book’s preface that both are “different approaches to acquiring knowledge of oneself.”

Dr. Olaoye positioned poetry as the elder of the two, referencing Greek poets like Archilochus and Sappho and Anacreon – all living and writing Before Christ – who “discovered through their poetry that all people are not striving for the same goals, that each differs in their desires.” Psychology as a science, she wrote, dates back to 1879. It is the stuff of perception, cognition, emotion, and so on, and how these relate to behaviour and interpersonal relationships. Psychology, like poetry, acknowledges then the individual, the self; and discerns that to know them you must look beyond what can be touched, and beyond what is said, to what is felt – even to what they may not know they’re feeling.

The poem *To Look at Anyone* probably captures this best.

“To look at anyone
If you would know that one
You must look long,
You must enter into
The millions of minute silences that pattern
Their words,
Their acts,
Their moods,
Their seasons,
Their cycles...”

Dr. Olaoye related in the introduction to the updated edition, how “dramatic” the results were when **Passions** was incorporated into her teaching of psychology. “It allows students to participate in a psychology that engages the complexity and creativity of mind and emotions.” It allows them to, as she notes elsewhere, write from their heads and hearts – both essential to life. The subject matter was relevant to psychology – just as psychology, a point she makes elsewhere – is relevant to poetry. More important to the casual reader perhaps is the accessibility of the material.

On the subject of accessibility, I can indulge a little bit in my favourite pieces. *Ars Poetica*; I like the way the questions almost tumble over each other like water gushing downhill unimpeded; the flow – when the questioning morphs to affirmation – simply changing paths without nary a stumble. It is a poem that lets you know at once that this is a poet moving from the high street of poetry as a mere reflection of culture, mirror of society, edutainment tool, political platform, or even romantic device to the rockier path of the inner mind and soul. *Ars* lets us know that this is a poet (and psychologist) with designs on digging beneath the surface of things, with jolting insight into the workings of the psyche, with a penchant and affection for nature imagery, with an instinctive understanding of the musicality of language. All of these elements are there:

“...What can I say to him
who fears fear,
yet who embraces fear,
and recognizes not the face of fear

...

Can I,
Am I

Become as mother earth
From whose depths
New well-springs of life
Gush and overflow?

...

Can I
Am I

Become an incandescent being
With whose spirit the rhythms of the Infinite
Might play,
And through whose voice
The dramas
And the ecstasies of the
Soul might unfold.”

Also touching on the passions of the poet is *Softly in the Twilight*. Having touched on this poem before I won't linger here except to say that here we see again the juxtaposition of opposites – “contradictory forces”, language and imagery that flows, the poet persona as conscience or guide, and the reoccurrence of nature imagery – for example, “the roots of the blazing branches.”

Join Me After Dusk is perhaps my favourite of the poems (a position contested by the beautiful, sensuous and sensual *Nyack in Moonlight*), simply because it's so evocative. It has atmosphere, and mood, and impressions that satisfy all the senses; and the language is like a ripe mango, juicy and sweet.

“When the sun rises, join me after dusk;
When your eyes greet the ever-widening lids of dawn,
Join me as they languish as close,
As the earth sinks into deep repose;

...

When the sun rises, join me after dusk,
When joyfully the crimson-petalled Hibiscus unfolds
To greet the morn,
Join me as its calyx closes,
As its beauty fades and decomposes;

...

When the sun rises, join me after dusk
When the night-blooming blossoms of Cereus droop
and wane
In the blazing light of day,
Join me as its essence gradually night encloses,
As this fragrant efflorescent bud, its exotic beauty
discloses...”

The language, the flow of it, opens it up to a romantic interpretation, but that would be limiting.

But the Romantic is in it – and I speak here not of the more casual romantic love but of the 19th century Romantic Movement in poetry and the other arts. I have written before that, in some ways, I see in Dr. Olaoye's poetry traces of Romanticism – and I say this as an inheritor of the same Caribbean-British literary tradition and a fan of poets like Keats and Shelly, who are associated with Romanticism. It's been a while since I studied them, but markers, as I remember it, included the profusion of nature imagery; moodiness, often melancholy in Keats' case; poetry that was vivid, expressive, intense, and sensuous; poetry that was symbolic and rich in imagery; poetry that often referenced folk tales and mythology, but whose concerns were the concerns of the individual; poetry that was imaginative and ignited my imagination. The traces are there in poems like *Jaguar*, *March Eve*, *From the Sandpiper*, *Reclined*, and others. In fact, there's a direct

link to Keats in Dr. Olaoye's referential and reverential *Ode to Spring* in which the first season is personified and her works celebrated.

“... With such gentle motion you descend
With such calm and subtle equipose
Yet so blithesome and efflorescent
Full of the dreams that each heart holds...”

But as I consider Dr. Olaoye's concern with the sciences' dismissal of the arts, I see another link in the fact that Romanticism was, in many ways, the counter-culture or backlash to the era of Enlightenment – associated with reason and aesthetically with Classicism, defined by restraint and formality.

That said, Dr. Olaoye has other influences or, maybe influences is too strong a word; rather poets to whom she certainly pays homage in her work. There's Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. Her *Nyack*, a passionate love poem, is fittingly dedicated to him given that he's known for, among other things, his passionate love poems. The language in *Nyack* is among the most lush and lovely in her collection:

“I slept with you
All night long
While the Hudson outside lay fair,
Aglow in the moonlight;
While the gently billowing waves
Splashed playfully against the pebbled shoreline below.
...
On waking,
Your mouth came from your dreams
From the depths of your life
And you gave me a taste of earth,
Of struggles, of daring, of determining.
I received your kiss
Purified by the blue and golden light of dawn
...
A kiss moistened by a morning glow of faith
And destined to echo through the day
With the timeless secrets of love.”

Two African American writers I admire – Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston – from another of my favourite periods, the Harlem Renaissance, are also referenced. The Harlem Renaissance was an exciting period of artistic expression and social thought, spanning roughly 1919 to the 1930s, with the New York neighbourhood as its centre and

heartbeat. A number of great artists are associated with this time – including Jamaican born Claude McKay, to whom Dr. Olaoye also paid tribute, with the poem *Breakthrough*. The cadence of Langston Hughes, a poet whose works had the colour, lyricism and grit of the Blues, is hinted at in *I Know Rivers*. Meanwhile, *For Zora Neale Hurston* which explores “surging contradictions” is dedicated to a daring writer and bold spirit, known for being in sharp contradiction with her time and contemporaries. Even Martin Luther King Jr. whose sermons and speeches often made for very poetic prose is referenced, again fittingly, in *On Becoming an Afro-American*. From the first line

“Breakout
Of the suffocating shell
Of Eurocentric racism
A temporary prison
built of power
Greed and materialism...”

it captures not exclusively King but the Civil Right Era, when cities burned, black youths sat in, and the masses marched.

But even with these diversions, if it’s even fair to call them that, Dr. Olaoye never loses sight of the book’s purpose: exploring the psyche and its various passions, and the blurring of the often too firm, in her view, line between the poetry and science of these. Essentially, she daringly challenges her discipline of choice to think outside the box, and **Passions of the Soul** is her exhibit A, B, and C. Hers is a challenge, as plainly articulated in *Rethinking Psychology*, to reject “Newtonian mechanical moulds” and experience “...new images of relativity”, to leap “...beyond outdated paradigms of reality...beyond words into new levels of awareness.”

* Second edition, published 2002; Northwind Publishers; Red Bank, New Jersey.